



The Handicaps of Handicapped Housing

Emmanuelle Colboc and Catherine Carpentier, translated by Eric Rosencrantz

Since February 2005, all new and renovated housing in France has to meet standards of accessibility for the disabled. In the authors' opinion, not only do these regulations reduce usable floor space, above all they constitute an indiscriminate – and inappropriate – approach that detracts from the quality of the housing and impoverishes the architecture.

Everyone agrees nowadays that there is a housing shortage in France, particularly for the most disadvantaged among us. Even though new housing is being built and some housing projects renovated, statistics show that while 400,000 new housing units were under construction in 2005, the figure was down to fewer than 275,000 in 2010.

Furthermore, while a two-bedroom social housing unit back around 1995 measured between 65 and 70 m², it has now been shrunk to 60-64 m² in order to minimize rents. The Equal Rights And Opportunities Act (*La loi sur l'égalité des droits et des chances*), which has given rise to the new accessibility regulations, among other things, requires that all housing built or renovated henceforth conform to a certain number of prescribed dimensions. The overall toll that takes on floor space can easily come to 15 to 20 m², depending on the size of the apartment: this space, “used” in bathrooms and toilets etc. essentially for wheelchair rotation, is obviously deducted from the other rooms, *i.e.* from the living room and the bedrooms. In a two-bedroom apartment back in 1995, the living room measured between 24 and 27 m²; now it hardly amounts to 20 m². These imposed dimensions ultimately mar the quality of the housing and impoverish the architecture: it is impossible to have little nooks and crannies or the narrow passages that children are particularly fond of – in a word, the distinctive traits that keep an apartment from being the same as the one next door.

In addition, until July of 2009, a special dispensation stipulated that only 5% of temporary housing (*e.g.* for students) had to be accessible to the handicapped. Since the repeal of that exemption, however, 100% of this housing, in which most tenants only stay for a few months, has to conform to the standards. Property developers and social housing agencies do not wish to reduce the number of housing units built, so they do not increase the overall size of each dwelling – which in turn gives rise to absurd situations: a student's living space, in which to put at least a cabinet and a desk (let's not forget he is, after all, a “student”), shrinks from 12 m² (or 70% of the floor space in his room) to 1.2 m² (or 7%), while the bathroom has nearly doubled in size. This response to the handicapped rule is correct in theory, as confirmed by the supervisory agencies. And the fact that the room becomes unsuited to its purpose, seeing as there is no space left for any of the furniture a student needs, is brushed aside: often as not, the project owners confine themselves to ensuring mere conformity with the rule, even if the serviceability of the housing can no longer be assured. The architect has to be extraordinarily tenacious, dauntless and resourceful if he is to succeed in obtaining a result that will be just barely acceptable to everyone, though certainly not ideal for an able tenant, much less for the disabled.

This rule also applies to property development activities *per se*. A private individual who takes out a loan for 25 years to buy a new flat cannot alter the plans for his home as he sees fit: he is

absolutely required to abide by the standards. Naturally, that gives rise to endless misunderstandings between buyers, developers and architects, but above all it leads many a prospective buyer to pull out. This is yet another thorn in the side of property developers, at a time when their market is not exactly booming.

Still and all, no-one questions the legitimacy of this law, seeing as a person's home is a key aspect of their identity. After suffering the trauma of a disabling accident, it is certainly crucial not to suffer a second one that entails having to leave one's home. This law is also tied in with an increasingly ageing population. So the problem stems from the compounding of several parameters, each of which has a coherence of its own: the diminution of overall housing space, the introduction of accessibility standards, and new mandatory levels of thermal efficiency, which increase the dimensions of the building's outer shell.

Depending on the degree to which it meets these standards, newly built housing is subject to new labels certifying the "high" or "inferior" quality thereof. These certifications have become every project owner's prime objective (since they determine eligibility for subsidies), fully eclipsing the unquantifiable qualities of the architecture, namely whether it is well integrated into the surrounding fabric and, above all, how much quality of life and wellbeing it has to offer future occupants.

Project owners now realize, at their cost, that it is a lot harder nowadays than ten years ago to build a good residential building. We architects have a sense that, apart from the project owners, we are the only ones asking whether this standard really serves its intended purpose, for we know how many hours we have to spend in ludicrous meetings trying to satisfy it. Given its sheer radicality and outsized scope of application, the standard cannot possibly allow for the particularities of each project or each type of handicap to the extent it claims to. The succinctness of its schemas obscures the vagueness of the printed doctrine, the imprecision of the legislation leaving the door wide open for disparate interpretations by the supervisory agencies: what some permit, others strictly prohibit, which often leaves architects completely at a loss.

And this produces some absurd results:

- The law only talks about a double bed (140 cm x 190 cm). So we're required to fit this big bed into a student's room on paper, though everyone knows the room will only be fitted out with a single bed.
- On the floors of a renovated building without elevators (*ipso facto* inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair), we are required to provide adequate room for maneuver for "wheelchair access".
- Given the problem of the accessibility of window handles, we often have to forego windows in the bathroom, which runs contrary to sustainable development, necessitating electric lighting and ruling out natural ventilation. The same goes for windows behind the kitchen counter.

In a word, the situation is serious – and costly to our society. Owing to the extremism of these regulations, we no longer know how to find a reasonable solution, however much expertise we may have. This hardline regulatory approach hamstringing the whole project development process and satisfying neither the project manager, who is aware that the only response he can come up with is the "least bad", nor the project owner, who can no longer achieve his economic objectives. These dwellings, which are not only more and more absurd to design, also cost more to build on account of the new technology they require: level-access showers and balconies, but also new facing and outside insulation provisions to achieve thermal targets. These new provisions, whether concerning the handicapped or the heating, have across-the-board repercussions on the construction industry, from suppliers and fitters to engineers assigned to create new technologies. The requisite approval procedures for all the new product technologies and their implementation take months, even years. The upshot is that all the buildings constructed nowadays make use of technologies that are still under development, so there is often no past experience thereof, no benefit of hindsight, to build on.

So it is that cost overruns, delays, untried technologies and unsuitable solutions are the current concomitants of housing construction in France. And it is the architect, at the fulcrum of this new regime, who is probably the most conscious thereof, as he ends up having to juggle all the information at once. Designing a residential building is becoming an exercise in the art of the flying-trapeze – and under mounting pressure. The better is the enemy of the good, says the old adage. By wanting to do it too well, in other words, we end up doing too much, which produces results that are at odds with our present-day needs, *i.e.* reactivity and rapid execution in order to house some 3.5 million French people who are currently without or in substandard housing.

Emmanuelle Colboc is a DPLG (officially registered) architect and assistant professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville.

Catherine Carpentier is a DPLG (officially registered) architect (and working for Emmanuelle Colboc's firm).

To quote this article:

Catherine Carpentier & Emmanuelle Colboc, « The Handicaps of Handicapped Housing », *Metropolitiques*, 13 April 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Handicaps-of-Handicapped.html>